

THE VEILS OF ISIS

By

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The Veils of Isis

TOWARD the end of the second dynasty a youth whom his father and mother had named Amanthes came to manhood near the village of Assouan on the Nile. From childhood on he had been self-willed and passionate beyond the ordinary, and growing in boldness and intelligence he took the lead of the other young men. Because of his superiority his father and mother, though poor cultivators, were persuaded to devote him to the priesthood. And as the young man was nothing loath they took him one day to the Temple of Osiris. The Chief Priest received them with kindness, for the youth's promise had been noised abroad and he spoke to them warmly in favor of the God whom he worshiped and His divine mission: he told them how Osiris had come down from Heaven to help men and had suffered Death for their sakes through the Powers of Darkness. With tears in his eyes he told of the resurrection of the God and how at the last He should judge the dead.

Scarcely had he finished when Amanthes cried:

"Can a God be defeated? Why didn't Osiris conquer the Darkness?" and other such things.

And when his father and mother, terrified by his boldness, tried to restrain him, for the Chief Priest held up his hands in deprecation, Amanthes went on stoutly:

"I can't adore a God who accepts defeat; and I don't fear judge or judgment. I want to worship Isis, the woman-goddess, the giver of life, for her creed of joy and hope and love must last as long as the earth lasts and the sun gives light."

The Chief Priest pointed out that the temples to Osiris were larger and more important than any other, and the service of the God was nobler and more highly rewarded, but Amanthes would not be persuaded, insisting that the only divinity he could worship was Isis, to whose service he was willing to devote himself night and day with all his heart.

Impressed by his earnestness and enthusiasm, the Chief Priest at length decided that it might be as well if Amanthes went down the river to Memphis to the great Temple of Isis, and as the young man took fire at the suggestion he offered to give him letters to the High Priest which would insure his being accepted, and he excused himself afterward for this weakness by saying that he had never met so eloquent a youth or so sincere a calling. Amanthes, he said, seemed careless about everything else, but the moment the name of Isis was

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mentioned his eyes glowed, his face became intense, and it really looked as if the youth were inspired.

Ten days later Amanthes journeyed down the river to Memphis, and presented himself before the authorities of the Temple of Isis. But here his passion carried little persuasion, and at first it seemed as if his desire would be thwarted. The High Priest read the letter of his colleague and, after one glance at Amanthes, proposed to engage him as a servitor in the Temple, but thought it right, at the same time, to warn him that only the best and noblest were selected to wait on the Goddess herself, and that before one could hope to enter her immediate Presence one must have spent half a lifetime in the temple.

"It took me," he said, "nearly five years to learn the routine of the service."

Amanthes listened with wide eyes and bowed in silence to the High Priest's derision, but from the very day he entered the temple he set himself to learn all the ritual and ceremonial forms, and devoted himself with such passion to whatever was given to him to do that he became a marked man among the younger priests.

Though he held himself aloof from all his comrades, he was not much disliked by them, for whenever his father and mother sent him presents of dates or dainties he shared them out among the others, contenting himself always with the simple sustenance provided in the Temple.

To his father and mother he wrote but once, telling them to look upon him as dead, for he had given himself to the service of the Goddess with heart and life and for him there was no looking back.

A few months after his admission to the Temple, Amanthes took a chance opportunity and begged the High Priest to enroll him among the immediate servants of the Goddess.

"I know all the forms and ceremonies by heart," he said, "and am eager now to learn the will of the Goddess herself."

The High Priest was greatly astonished; but though he found by examining the young man that he was indeed a master of all the services, he would not grant his request.

"You have still much to learn," he said, "before you can hope for such honor, and the next test is difficult," and on that he took Amanthes to the library of the Temple and showed him a room filled with great rolls of papyrus, and priests studying them.

"They are all at work," he explained, "interpreting the divine Oracles."

"But where are the Sayings of the Goddess?" cried Amanthes, as if nothing else mattered.

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“Here,” said the High Priest, turning over one small yellow roll, “are the sacred words of the Divine One, the words which have been commented upon by wise men for thousands of years, and before we can believe that anyone is worthy to enter the shrine of the Goddess he must first show his fitness by interpreting her Oracles, or correcting some of the commentators who have gone before.”

“Let me first see the Goddess and learn her will,” argued the young man; “when I know her I shall be able to interpret her words.”

“Presumption!” cried the High Priest, “mortals can only get glimpses of the Divine, and can never know the divine Will completely, any more than they can see the Goddess unveiled.”

All the young man’s pleading was met with a steady refusal: it was unheard of that any priest should be admitted to the Shrine of the Deity before he had passed at least ten years in the Temple.

“I myself,” said the High Priest at length, “knew all the Oracles and had written two great books upon them before I was admitted in my twelfth year of service, and even then I only served at the door, and never entered the Shrine but with eyes bound so that I might not look upon the naked beauty of the Goddess.”

Amanthes pleaded with him as one pleads for life; but still the High Priest remained obdurate.

“There are the Oracles,” he said, pointing to the books; “distinguish yourself and I will shorten the time of your probation as much as I dare, or as custom will allow.”

Amanthes once more bowed his head and took his place among the students.

In the seventh month of the same year Amanthes interpreted a saying of the Goddess with such freedom that all the readers cried blasphemy against him, and brought him before the High Priest to answer for the crime. Amanthes defended himself with much boldness and many good reasons, till the High Priest cried:

“You read the Oracles as if the Goddess were a woman and nothing more, and that is wrong.”

“How else can they be read?” retorted Amanthes. “If she is not a woman one can never understand her, and if she is more than a woman we men can only get to the divine through the human.”

The High Priest himself was shaken, and hesitated to deride, for in the course of the argument he had found that the young man had read the sacred Roll from beginning to end, and knew every word of the Goddess by heart.

“How did you learn it,” he couldn’t help asking, “in so short a time?”

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Amanthes only looked at him smiling, by way of answer, and again begged the Chief Priest to admit him now to the service of the Goddess, for he had surely proved himself and been patient. There was nothing to gain by waiting.

But immemorial custom was against him and the High Priest resented his insistence.

"You are too daring," he said at length; "it may be well to use boldness to a woman, but to a Goddess you must show reverence."

"No, no," cried Amanthes, "reverence to the woman, who doesn't expect it and will be won by it, boldness to the Goddess."

"Blasphemy," cried the High Priest; "you are on a dangerous way and I must not encourage you," and motioning to the great bronze door, behind them, he added: "Go on diligently as you have begun and it will be open to you perhaps after five years."

"Five years!" repeated Amanthes sadly; "five years of life and youth lost: five years!"

"That door has never opened in less," replied the High Priest solemnly, but as he spoke Amanthes gripped his arm, crying:

"Look, look!" and when the High Priest turned he found the door of the Shrine standing open.

"Strange," said the old man; "it must be some accident; I will shut it," and he seized the handle, but the door would not be moved; and as he stood there all shaken and hesitating, Amanthes with eyes aflame cried out:

"See, Isis the Beloved, Isis herself has answered my prayer."

And Amanthes moved as if to enter the sacred place, but the High Priest held him back, warning:

"If you enter without reverence and bound eyes you will die on the threshold."

Amanthes laughed aloud, and strode past him into the Shrine, and as the High Priest held up his hands in fear and horror, the bronze door drew to of itself and closed between them.

From this time on Amanthes was constantly in the Shrine of the Goddess. Indeed, he scarcely gave himself time to eat or sleep, and everyone remarked how thin he grew and haggard with the constant service. And when, after some months, the High Priest warned him that his health would break down, and told him that he must not forget that the chief thing was the interpretation of the Oracles, Amanthes answered impatiently:

"I know nothing yet: the Goddess vouchsafes no answer to my entreaties! How can one interpret without knowledge?"

Now there was a tradition that in the first dynasty a young priest

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had been consumed in the service of Isis, and had wasted away before the Goddess, till one day he was translated into flame and disappeared in a moment, and it crossed the High Priest's mind that Amanthes was on the same road, and likely to meet the same fate, and he desisted from admonishing him, fearing to make bad worse. He left the young man to his own devices, till strange tales came to him from the other priests that set all the Temple whispering.

It was put about that at night Amanthes used to speak to the Goddess as if she were a woman, and touch her statue as if the limbs were flesh. He had been overheard entreating her as a lover entreats his mistress, telling over her beauties adoringly, and begging her to lift the veil that prevented him enjoying her divine loveliness. While all the priests were muttering, and wondering how the impious boldness would be punished, one came to them with ashen face and a stranger tale.

"The Goddess has answered Amanthes," he gasped; "Isis asked him why he wanted the veil lifted, and he stretched forth his arms and cried: 'For Love's sake,' and as he spoke the Goddess trembled, and I fled, for indeed the sacred veil had begun to fall away—"

The priests wouldn't credit the tidings. But when Amanthes came forth from the Shrine some believed, for he was as one transfigured. He spoke to no man, but went straight to his cell, and from this time on he was continually heard praising the Goddess in song and glorifying her Service.

A little later Amanthes went to the High Priest and asked him to be allowed to write an interpretation of the Oracles, and his interpretation was so bold at once and simple that the High Priest was amazed by it and frightened, and asked him how he dared to treat the divine words so boldly, and the young man answered quietly now and in all humility:

"Love is my only guide, and the boldness of love is reverence."

The High Priest bowed his head, for in spite of himself he was moved by the young man's tone and unaccustomed humbleness. And when the servitors came to the High Priest and demanded that Amanthes should be punished for insolent boldness he shook his head and rebuked them impatiently. And when they persisted, declaring that the worship of Amanthes for the Goddess was an outrage and insult to her, he answered simply:

"The Goddess can protect herself."

It was evident to all that he did not believe the slanders. And indeed such portions of the interpretations of Amanthes as the High Priest thought fit to publish were so astonishingly simple and con-

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vincing that they won many to admiration, and his fame was noised abroad throughout all the land of Egypt, and people came from afar to hear his words and to listen to his interpretation of the divine speech.

And his humility now was as evident as his boldness had been aforetime.

“I know nothing,” he said: “I am but a reed through which the Goddess speaks: of myself nothing.

His modesty impressed the people more than any assurance would have done, and when he served Isis in public the great Temple was thronged and all the people stirred by the fervor of the ritual, and when at the end he knelt before the Goddess, to recite the formal benediction, he prayed with such passion that everyone was affected, and the worship of the Goddess, the Giver of Life, spread on all sides and grew mightily.

The success of Amanthes made many of the priests envious, and sharpened the jealousy of those who had been against him from the beginning. And of these one of the chief was that servitor who had already spied upon him, and reported his entreaties of the Goddess to the High Priest. This man had been one of the most learned of the commentators before Amanthes had appeared. He did not know all the words of the Goddess like Amanthes, but he knew by heart all the comments that had been made on them and all the interpretations for a thousand years, which were indeed in themselves a library of dead men’s words. He had been supplanted by the coming of Amanthes, and now lived for nothing but his undoing. One day he came to the High Priest with a mysterious air and a slander which he would not tell, and when the High Priest pressed him to say what it was, he withstood him.

“I will not repeat what I have heard,” he said, “nor soil my lips with the blasphemy. Come and hear for yourself.”

And when the High Priest refused to come, for he was very old and fearful of shocks, the slanderer insisted:

“You will see Amanthes,” he said, “at his foul work; and you will see Her too, and you shall judge whether such things are to be permitted.”

He spoke with such horror and hinted at such practices that the High Priest at length consented to go to his cell with him and spy upon Amanthes; for his cell joined the Shrine itself, and was only separated from it by one wall. And he showed the High Priest that, when his cell was darkened, they could see between two layers of the stone everything that went on in the Shrine of the Goddess and hear

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every word as distinctly as if they had been within the sacred place.

And while the High Priest and servitor were listening, Amanthes entered the Shrine and stood before the Goddess. And they saw that he had come as from the bath, for his neck shone and his linen had been bleached by the Nile water. For some time he stood in dumb entreaty with hands outstretched, and the High Priest thought that the Goddess trembled before the dumb intensity of the appeal, and he turned his head aside for he would not trust his eyes.

At length Amanthes spoke, and the High Priest scarcely recognized his voice:

“How long?” he cried. “How long?”

And his arms fell as if in despair, and he sighed heavily as one in pain. And suddenly he went over to the Goddess, and put his hands upon her hips, and the Chief Priest turned aside breathless, for he would not look, though the servitor with sharp-set eyes nudged him. But he heard Amanthes speaking, and as he spoke he turned again to the Shrine, and this was what he heard:

“How long am I to wait, O Queen; how long? Before I knew you I worshiped you, and every favor you have accorded me has fed my passion. When you removed the first veil you showed me a new Isis, even lovelier than my imagining, and I stood entranced; and every veil you have taken off since has revealed some new perfection hitherto undreamed. Am I then unworthy to have the last veil lifted? Unworthy, though consumed with adoration.”

And as his hands touched the Goddess, the High Priest saw that she trembled as if she had been flesh and blood, and his breath caught, for the Goddess spoke.

“If I refuse,” said Isis, “it is for your sake, Amanthes,” and her hand touched his hair.

And Amanthes cried aloud:

“To refuse one thing is to refuse all: love knows no denials: I would see you as you are, as the Gods see you face to face.”

And the High Priest shuddered in fear, for the grave voice of the Goddess was heard again:

“No woman’s soul can resist love: to-morrow it shall be as you desire.”

And they saw Amanthes twine his arms round the Goddess and kiss her limbs, and with the last look the High Priest saw that he was prone before the Shrine with his lips pressed against the feet of Isis.

And the High Priest as he went would not even speak with the servitor, for he was full of apprehension, and torn in many ways, partly by affection for Amanthes, partly by curiosity, and most of all for fear

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of what would happen on the morrow.

In the morning he gave orders that the servitor should be in close attendance upon himself, and that his cell, from which one could look into the Shrine, should be closed, and he ordained twenty-four hours of solemn tasting and prayer for all the priests, and decreed that the Temple should be shut.

In the second hour, after the orders had been given, Amanthes came to him, and the High Priest hardly dared to look on him, for his face was as the face of one who had talked to the Divine and won his soul's desire.

But Amanthes stretched out his strong hands and caught the old man by the shoulders, and said in his rich voice: "I thank you. You have done what I would have ordered in your place."

And the High Priest gasped:

"Are you not afraid?"

"Afraid?" he cried. "To-night is the night for which I was born," and as he turned and went the High Priest saw his shining eyes and felt a little envious.

The morning after the great fast the High Priest went himself to the Shrine with all his attendants robed and in order as to solemn service. And after the three prayers the bronze doors were opened; and there, stretched before the Goddess, lying prone, was Amanthes. And the moment the High Priest saw him he knew that the youth was dead, and when he looked up at the Goddess he saw she was veiled as usual, and her hands were by her side.

All that he had seen and heard twenty-four hours before, and all that he had feared, were to him as a dream.

The body of Amanthes was already cold, and the priests knew that he must have died in the first hour of the night. They came together in solemn meeting and heard the story of the servitor.

And one of the older priests rose and said that surely the death contained a great lesson.

"As soon as the mortal saw the Immortal, life ceased; for who can look upon the Godhead and live? Death is the punishment of such boldness."

And many of the priests agreed with this; but another priest objected:

"We mortals," he began, "have surely something of the divine in us, or we would not even wish to see the Gods as they are; nor perhaps be able to if they allowed us. But behind all the Gods, behind Isis and Osiris and Horus, there is a power greater than themselves, Fate, which to mortals is Death. And this was shown to Amanthes, for when

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the last veil was lifted, instead of the Goddess he adored, he saw the death's head, and the image of death took him."

But another priest rose and said:

"Surely the result might have been expected. As veil after veil fell, Amanthes saw one incarnation after another of divine beauty, and his soul was ravished. But when the last veil was stripped off Amanthes found that his divinity was in reality an ordinary woman, and his heart turned to water and his soul died."

And this interpretation seemed most reasonable to the majority of the priests.

But the people knew better, for when the story was told outside the Temple a woman cried:

"The truth is plain! Having at last found a perfect lover, the Goddess took him with her to Amenti, the land beyond the Darkness."